Personal Digital Video Stories

The Live Image as Engaging Reflection Tool in Vocational Educational Training

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Preface

These Proceedings represent the work of contributors to the 15th European Conference on e-Learning, ECEL 2016, hosted this year by the Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic on 27-28 October. The Conference Chair is Professor Jarmila Novotná and the Programme Co-Chair is Dr Antonín Jančařík.

The conference will be opened with a keynote address by Stanislav Štech from Charles University on the topic of *Opportunities and Threats in Introducing Educational ICT for Cognitive and Personal Development of Students*. Johan van Niekerk, from the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, South Africa will address the topic of *the use of Brain-Compatible Learning in an e-Learning Environment*. On the second day the keynote will be delivered by Michèle Artigue, Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris, France on the topic *Mathematics Education in the Digital Era*.

ECEL provides a valuable platform for individuals to present their research findings, display their work in progress and discuss conceptual advances in many different branches of e-Learning. At the same time, it provides an important opportunity for members of the EL community to come together with peers, share knowledge and exchange ideas.

With an initial submission of 190 abstracts, after the double blind, peer review process there are 90 academic papers, 5 Phd Papers, 5 Work in Progress papers and 1 non academic paper in these Conference Proceedings. These papers reflect the truly global nature of research in the area with contributions from some 35 countries, including Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Hong Kong, Iran, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Lithuania, Malaysia, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Slovakia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, UK and USA.

A selection of papers – those agreed by a panel of reviewers and the editor will be considered for development and publication in the EJEL (Electronic Journal of e-Learning www.ejel.org).

We wish you a most interesting conference.

Jarmila Novotná and Antonin Jančařík
October 2016

Personal Digital Video Stories: The Live Image as Engaging Reflection Tool in Vocational Educational Training

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Abstract: The drop-out rate among students attending vocational training institutions is higher than for other forms of education at the same entry level (in Denmark, but also generally in Europe). A recent Danish reform has aided students, who enter the first part of the basic program directly from primary school. However, there remains a high risk for older students, who do not come directly from primary school; and there is a risk of becoming 'school-weary' (in its broadest understanding) in the periods between school and company practice. This paper introduces experiences with students own digital multimedia and video productions in Vocational Educational Training (VET). These video productions focused on the subjects of their future profession, and increased students' motivation and experience of professional pride. Through a semi-structured literature review, the paper then argues for a research agenda focusing on video productions in combination with digital storytelling, followed by a presentation of the digital storytelling features. The paper concludes with a suggestion to initiate research in what is identified as Personal Digital Video (PDV) Stories within longitudinal settings, while students are at school and in practical placements with companies. This may increase students' social engagement and interest in the subject matter, together with greater awareness of professional identity, which could help decrease drop-out rates for vocational training.

Keywords: personal digital video stories, vocational educational training, video production, digital storytelling

1. Introduction

"Allan in the back row has dropped out. Without a message to the school, he stopped coming. He did not understand the subject" (Simmel 2010, p. 109, translated from Danish). Many young people struggle to make sense of their vocational training. They experience social challenges and have difficulty in getting the theoretical and practical parts to meet. Some are particularly vulnerable, are tired of school, and feel they are forced "to school" by the Danish legislation that requires youths to have an educational plan; or they lack support from home, and so forth. At the same time, many youths at 'the other end of the spectrum' do not feel they are sufficiently challenged, academically and professionally. They too may experience declining motivation and lack of engagement in their education. During late summer 2016, two meetings were held with Vocational Educational Training (VET) schools (the school *EUC Syd* in the southern part of Denmark and the school *TEC* in the capital area), which confirmed this picture. Consequently, both groups of students (those who find the subject and profession difficult, and those who lack intellectual challenges) are vulnerable and at risk of dropping out.

The intention is not to paint a bleak picture —there are also many students who do well and thrive. Nevertheless, the drop-out rate among students attending Danish vocational training institutions is quite high compared to other educations at the same entry level: approximately 50% in 2014 (Cedefop, 2014) compared with 15–20% for ordinary and commercial colleges, etc. (MBUL, 2015). This trend applies across Europe (OECD, 2012); consequently, research into educational drop-out is a high priority in the EU, particularly in light of the Europe 2020 goal of reducing early school-leavers to less than 10% (EU, 2011). Therefore, despite recent reforms, approaches to the 'school-weary' (in its broadest understanding) still need to be addressed. As in many educational contexts, IT-based learning designs are discussed as a promoter of learning; however, in vocational training contexts (in Denmark, at least), many practical designs are implemented based on experiences from k1-12 school research rather than research-based designs from VET contexts (Riis 2016). This paper presents preliminary findings from a VET context, which support a research agenda focused on students' Personal Digital Video (PDV) Stories.

2. Vocational educational training — the system, the students, and the need for grounding reflections

VET in Denmark employs the dual training principle, wherein students alternate between periods in school and training placements within a company. As such, the company makes a contractual agreement to accept a student as an apprentice, and the alternating 'sandwich structure' aims to ensure that the "apprentice acquire theoretical, practical, general and personal skills which are in demand by the labour market" (Cedefop, 2014, p. 4). This alternating training model is particularly used for IVET (Initial VET, a concept used for people who enter the vocational training program prior to having been established in a job function, although workplace retraining is also common, see EQAVET (2016)). During summer 2014, a reform act was passed (commencing during the summer 2015 intake) to make the Danish VET system more attractive, including simplifying the structure, and introducing a requirement that students must achieve passing grades in Danish and mathematics at primary school level. The reforms also aim to reduce the drop-out rate, from the current 50% to achieving 67% completion rate in 2025 (Cedefop, 2014).

The reformed system retains the dual training principle, and hence there are still many transitions, not only between school and company, but also within school, such as between the basic and the main program. The reform introduces an additional transition, as the basic program is divided into two components: The first part (6 months) is for students, who come directly from primary school. At the end of the 6 months, they choose one of four lines of profession: Care, health, and pedagogic; Office, trade, and business services; Food, agriculture, and experiences; or Technology, construction, and transport. They then progress to the second part (6 months) and are joined by older students who finished their primary education more than one year previously (UVM 2014). Upon completion of the basic program (which ends with a test), the students choose a specific education (as carpenter, CNC-technician, cook, etc.) and find an apprenticeship position. In the three-year main program that follows, the students alternate between the company and school. The hope is that a more homogeneous group during the first half-year of the basic program will promote higher completion rates, as confirmed by the results of the first half-year of the reform (Møller, 2015 and UVM, 2016). However, analyses by the Ministry of Education (UVM 2016) and the discussion with the two previous mentioned VET schools (EUC Syd and TEC) suggest that there are still challenges with the more heterogeneous group in the second half of the basic program. When the numbers from the Ministry of Education were published, Stine Vrang Elias, chairman of the Council of Basic Vocational Education, stated: "Therefore, it is pivotal that all parties in the sector […] continue to focus their attention on developing the Danish VET, so that they can attract and retain the skilled young people and equip them for the labor marked with the increasing complex qualifications" (Vrang Elias, 2016 – translated from Danish).

However, not only professional qualifications are at play; social skills also play a significant part. In a study of 379 drop-outs from youth programs, where 106 were from vocational programs, more than half pointed to bullying, followed by fear of school failure leading to low self-confidence and satisfaction. It was concluded that: "This leads to sporadic absences that become more and more frequent and eventually lead to a drop-out status. Apart from social exclusion and school failure, participants in the study directly link their drop-out status to the lack of meaningful support from their teachers, to low teachers' ability for inspiration, to the lack of practical subjects in the school program, to wrong decisions about their education, to serious problems at home and more" (Tsalapatas, Alimisi & Heidmann 2014, p. 43).

Danish research prior to the reform identifies the dual training principle itself, and particularly the school/work transitions, as sources of learning challenges. Firstly, the program structure means that students frequently need to move back and forth between different contexts and in various individual tempi. The unresolved question here is: During their education, how can students create communities and develop a feeling of belonging and being part of a youth culture? (Brown, Louw & Katznelson et al., 2011). From a student perspective, the structure also makes it difficult to establish relationships, and the experience of 'one whole education' is challenged. The fundamental issue is that students do not experience or understand the relationships, particularly between school and the practices of their company, and find it difficult to create links between the different learning contexts during their training (Sjøberg et al., 1999; Aarkrog, 2007; Nielsen, 2009; Jørgensen, 2009). Another associated challenge is about how students first and foremost identifies with the need for practical competences and often lack a basic understanding or explanation of the meaning of theoretical learning in school compared to their professional apprenticeship (Tanggaard, 2006; Koudahl, 2007; Hansen, 2010). This means that students'

motivation is often linked to practice, and to practice-based learning at the workplace, while they are less motivated to participate in school activities.

3. Digital video production at VET — learned potentials and challenges

Digitalization happens everywhere, also in VET, where examples of video productions are also found. Hansen and Brodersen (2015) describe two uses of video production in the training of a dental technician and an auto mechanic. The examples show that teacher presentations, recorded on video, can be used meaningfully for student differentiation. However, the authors warn that video clips must not replace the teacher and personal feedback. The present study of this paper focuses on another type of video production, namely student-produced videos. These experiences stem from a research and development project in which one of the authors (Rikke Ørngreen) assumed a research-sparring-partner role for a wide range of VET school-based activities during 2011–2012.

An example of this activity is that students training to be cooks took photographs of their preparation of a recipe, to be edited into a photo montage with annotated text (Figure 1). The discussion with the researcher showed that some students were poorly engaged, and often arrived late or not at all. The teacher agreed to try this assignment with some of these students. In this process of students taking pictures, the teacher was surprised to find that the students began correcting each other, with phrases such as, “hold the knife like this” or “you know [name of teacher] always says we should…”, which the teacher had not previously heard from these students. The teacher also felt that the students appeared to have greater pride in their work, both in the photomontage and while cooking. The teacher reported that students spent more time on the lesson and in subsequently editing the production. In an interview with the researcher, a student remarked that the editing process was: “better than the long written reports – I really don’t like writing.” Lastly, it was felt (even among the students themselves) that it was an achievement for the students to attend school at all. The interview showed that the students perceived the process as creative, and that it supported a meta-level of reflection (reflection on the actual task, on themselves, and their roles in this profession). Furthermore, the teacher remarked that the student with the highest absence attended school on time the following day.

The research and development project conducted experiments using various digital and interactive productions among, for example, electricians (Figure 1) and agricultural and business school students. These small experiments showed great potential, but also that such momentum may be difficult to sustain in the long term. For example, one of the teachers asked: “What do we do now; is this something that we keep on repeating; for how long; and every week or sometimes?” Conversely, the previous section demonstrated that the reasons for VET drop-outs were often related to social issues. The video productions in this project were often carried out in groups, and these groups looked as if they were not only working hard, but also seem to be having “just fun,” with good energy and bonding between peers.

Figure 1: Example of video productions by VET students

4. Discussion of future steps

The research and development project thus showed signs that the produced videos (comprising video recordings, annotated photos, photo montages, and animations assembled into a digital video) act as a reflection tool that supports the professional thinking and the sense of ‘professional pride’. The process of making the

digital video, and later sharing and discussing this with peers and supervisors, is a mediator for engagement, motivation, and supports retention of the subjects depicted in the video.

Due to the students challenges in the dual training principle, it is natural to think a longitudinal perspective into the use of video productions, which seem to support social engagement and theory-practice reflections needed. The dialogue with the two VET schools, shows that it would be adequate to think the video production use into the VET's existing portfolio thinking. On the other hand, it is also important not to overdo such approaches, as there is a risk of both students and teachers tiring of the method. Another of the authors (Arnt Louw) investigated VET students' use of logbooks / portfolios, which showed that: "... it is absolutely essential for the results, that the process directly involves students as much as possible, so they develop ownership of the project and that nervousness to participate is minimized" (Louw, 2015, p. 15). From research in longitudinal use of e-portfolios at university level (which used a mix of written and multimodal productions), it was found that ownership is an issue even if students were involved fully into the process of making the portfolio. The research points to that, if the e-portfolio was either mandatory or had to be submitted as part of an examination, then students did not necessarily see the e-portfolio as their own, even if they made it. Furthermore, even if the process showed clear signs of supporting reflection, theory, and practice building, the students doubted whether the produced content was 'good enough' or 'academic enough' when the content consisted of audio or video files. In contrast, students newer raised similar doubts about written submissions (Ørngreen, 2009).

To move the process forward, the digital storytelling approach was examined in order to use digital video productions constructively and meaningfully over longer periods; with different roles, ownership on several levels; and in a process that supports the social and professional spheres as well as theory/practice relations.

5. Digital stories as a catalyst for social engagement, professional dialogue, and reflection

Digital Storytelling (DS) centers on constructing personal narratives through the use of multiple digital media and modalities, including images, voice, music, video, and animation. The method was originally developed in the United States in 1993 by Joe Lambert and Dana Atchley, who aimed to give marginalized groups a voice through the use of bottom-up activities, applying user-driven practices (Lambert, 2013). The Center for Digital Storytelling opened in Berkeley in 1993, and has facilitated more than 1000 workshops (Lambert, 2013). The method has since been established and used internationally (e.g., Hull & Katz, 2006; Lundby, 2008; Hartley & McWiliam, 2009; Davis, 2011; Luttrell, Restler & Fontaine, 2012). A number of DS projects (particularly in Australia, Denmark, and the UK) focused on the involvement of various groups, with the objective of giving them a voice in society, allowing for reflection on their own practice and professional identity, and support for relational work (Hull & Katz, 2006; Taub-Pervizpour, 2009; Podkalicka & Campbell, 2010; Luttrell et al., 2012; Hardy & Summer, 2014; Jamissen, 2015). Additionally, several studies show that the method can develop collaborative skills, mastery of multimodal digital technology, self-knowledge, self-representation, learning and reflection (Alterio, 2002; Barrett, 2006; Haug et al., 2012; Jamissen, 2015).

The method consists of different phases: identification and building of one's own personal narrative; a multimodal production phase; and various collaborative process by which participants find their central narrative, which is then communicated in short digital videos, that are self-produced but with professional assistance. The work on narratives offers participants an opportunity to explore, understand, and link their past experiences with current situations and future envisions, focusing on the various associated feelings and thoughts (McKay & Ryan, 1995; McCorquodale & Kinsella, 2015). The DS process has the potential to create meaningful bridges between participants' personal and professional lives (Walters, 2014; Haug et al., 2012). The personal dimension of the method opens the participants to 'see themselves in the mirror' through self-representations (Lundby, 2008) and also acts as a bridge in a community. For example, personal perspective gives the stories identity, and the participants are brought into each other's realities when the stories are shared in the so-called "story circles" (Haug et al., 2012). These digital storytelling/sharing sessions are seen as supporting social reflection, learning processes, and the development of a community of practice (Fletcher & Cambre, 2009). The multimodal dimension of the method, working with text, sound, and images, allows participants to access and explore their experiences and ideas from different angles; and may support students with reading/writing challenges, as they can surpass the limitations of those formats and engage fully in reflection and production processes (Gythfeldt & Ohlman, 2012).

The DS method also includes challenges that need to be explicitly addressed. For example, studies show that participants in educational institutions (both teachers and students) may be resistant to 'exhibit' their own personal and private sphere in the DS phases (Ribeiro et al., 2014; Lundby, 2012). Also, tension can arise when the participants' stories do not match the organization's strategy or do not confirm the 'wanted' tale (Haug et al., 2012). If the personal dimension is absent or the institutional strategy is over-emphasized, there is a risk that the results become pure information videos that fail to fulfill the potential of the method for including identity development (Haug et al., 2012). However, in a DS study of university students and teachers, the process increased interpersonal relationships and empathy among the participants, despite their initial opposition to the personal dimension: "This process fosters opportunities to connect and deepen relationships between students and teachers and amongst students" (Ribeiro et al., 2014, p. 184). This emphasizes the importance of the facilitator's awareness of possible risks in a DS-process, which are similar to the aforementioned experiences from the VET logbooks and e-portfolio projects.

6. A research agenda: Personal digital video stories in VET — or simply: PDV-stories in VET

It is argued here that the DS method is supportive of social engagement and provides a space for professional dialogue through a process that is very democratic. The results from the development and research project at Danish VET educations show that the involvement of teachers in the video production helps both parties to gain a good understanding of each other; and at the same time, because the process is motivating for the students, a better theory/practice balance can be achieved.

The inclusion of company supervisors may help alter the assumption that: "Nowadays, it seems that there is a general agreement that schools fail to promote the value of education and the value of active participation in the school community. More and more students (regardless expression of drop-out tendency) describe themselves as 'tired' by the school system" (Tsalapatas, Alimisi & Heidmann, 2014, p.44).

There are reasons to believe that video production exercises may better achieve their potential when teachers and company supervisors participate in some of the actives. This participation could provide a basis for understanding each other's expectations and environments. It is therefore suggested that future research examines what can be termed Personal Digital Video Stories (PDV-stories).

There is a need to systematically develop, test, and verify sustainable educational designs that make use of personal digital video stories within the second basic program, and in the transitions between school and practice. It is suggested that PDV-stories, used repeatedly in smaller segments (e.g., 2–3 days in a week) throughout the second basic level and during periods of practice in companies, may support students and their willingness to continue. The PDV-stories can be used in both physical presence processes when students are attending school, and in online distributed processes during their company placements.

7. Conclusion

The paper has shown that drop-out rates are high in the VET context, particularly during the second part of the basic program and in the main program. Specifically, students experience difficulties with theory/practice relations, and alternating between periods in school and company placements. Based on experiences from video productions used in a Danish VET setting and from Digital Storytelling, a combination is suggested, framed as Personal Digital Video Stories (PDV-stories).

The objectives of the envisioned PDV-stories are to:

- Increase social engagement, professional identity, and reflection on professional knowledge;
- Provide clarification in the theory/practice dimensions, and a better match between the school and company placement periods;
- Thereby encouraging students to complete their training programs and decrease drop-rates.

For these objectives to be achieved, research is needed to systematically develop, test, and verify sustainable educational designs that make use of personal digital video stories in VET.

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